

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 001272

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL MASS MOPS PHUM NI LI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA:-TWO BATTALIONS CAN DEPLOY QUICKLY TO LIBERIA-BUT NEED HELP

Classified By Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons 1.5
(b) and(d).

¶11. (C) Summary. During a late evening July 19 discussion with Ambassador Jeter, President Obasanjo decided Nigeria would deploy two OFR-trained battalions to Liberia. Obasanjo gave the green light to deploying one of the battalions currently in Sierra Leone and also a battalion currently in Nigeria. Obasanjo hoped that he could leverage deployment of the two battalions into future OFR-style training for an additional five battalions as discussed during President Bush's July 12 visit to Nigeria. Stressing that Nigeria was prepared to deploy quickly, he discounted reports that ECOWAS would not be ready to deploy until mid-August. Obasanjo said that when he visited Conakry July 14, President Conte had agreed to restrain LURD but that Conte had not followed through this promise. Obasanjo stated that once Nigeria troops had deployed he would give Charles Taylor a 48-hour ultimatum to go into exile or face arrest. Currently, a Liberian delegation headed by Minister of State Jonathan Taylor was visiting Nigeria, ostensibly to prepare for Taylor's asylum. End Summary.

WE CAN DEPLOY OFR BATTALIONS

¶12. (C) During a July 19 meeting at the Presidential Villa, Ambassador delivered the demarche on the use of OFR-trained battalions to President Obasanjo. Obasanjo responded positively that Nigeria would deploy OFR-battalions. The first battalion could be one currently deployed in Sierra Leone. Mentioning that UN SG Annan had raised this possibility with him, Obasanjo said he told Annan that Nigeria would not object to shifting a battalion from Sierra Leone to Liberia provided the level of assistance (i.e. equipment, logistical support and per diem) were commensurate to that received in Sierra Leone. Obasanjo said he did not want his soldiers receiving less pay in exchange for Liberia's greater danger. That would be callous and the soldiers would grumble that I was stealing their money, Obasanjo asserted. (Comment: Obasanjo's point is well taken from his perspective. It would be difficult to ask soldiers to receive less in the face of greater danger in Liberia. Moreover, if the stipend for the Nigerian battalion coming out of Sierra Leone must match UN levels, it will be difficult not to apply the same daily stipend to the entire ECOWAS deployment in Liberia. End Comment.)

¶13. (C) Obasanjo continued that the second battalion would be an OFR battalion currently in Ogoja, Cross Rivers State. That battalion was deployed in Ogoja due to the friction with Cameroon over the Bakassi peninsula; however, with the de-escalation of tension resulting from the ongoing bilateral dialogue with Cameroon, Obasanjo felt comfortable in moving that battalion. Obasanjo had briefly contemplated using the battalion headquartered at Agenebode, Edo State. However, elements of that battalion have been advanced to Warri in contemplation of a police action against Ijaw militants who have taken over control of the environs around Warri and disrupted oil production. Hinting that action in Warri might be imminent, Obasanjo concluded he would not interrupt the deployment of these forces. (Note: We subsequently learned from General Akoji, Director of Army Operations, that 26 Battalion in Sokoto would deploy to Liberia, not the Ogoja battalion. The Ogoja battalion had already served in Sierra Leone but was not OFR-trained. Because it was once deployed in Sierra Leone, Obasanjo apparently had thought that it was an OFR-trained unit. End Note.)

¶14. (C) Obasanjo interrupted his conversation with

Ambassador Jeter to telephone Chief of Defense Staff General Ogomudia. Obasanjo instructed Ogomudia that Nigeria should deploy the two OFR battalions to Liberia. Ogomudia dissented, offering that battalions currently in Plateau and Taraba States be sent to Liberia. Obasanjo overruled his Defense Chief's objections, explaining that demonstrating maximum use of the OFR battalions would build a strong argument in favor of USG-OFR-style training for an additional five battalions. After ending the telephone conversation with Ogomudia, Obasanjo said that his Chief of Defense Staff was "hopping mad" and that he would need to show the army that Nigeria had received some benefit for deploying the OFR battalions. Obasanjo then remarked that President Bush should honor Nigeria's request to train an additional five battalions. Obasanjo repeated this tacit quid pro quo several more times during the meeting.

WE CAN DEPLOY QUICKLY

15. (C) Obasanjo dismissed the report that ECOWAS would not be ready to deploy until August 16. The President claimed that neither he nor his Chief of Defense Staff knew the source of that report. Obasanjo stated that he was trying to locate General Abubakar, the ECOWAS negotiator, to see if he knew the source of this untimely message. Obasanjo stressed that he was prepared to deploy Nigeria troops within a few days provided the needed logistical support was given.

LURD MUST STOP

16. (C) Ambassador Jeter told Obasanjo that the LURD, quickly advancing on Monrovia, must be compelled to stop its offensive. Monrovia risked descent into chaos that would make troop deployment almost impossible. Obasanjo revealed that his July 14 visit to Conakry was to tell President Conte to bridle the LURD before they entered Monrovia. He warned Conte that he would hold the Guinean leader responsible should one Nigerian soldier be hurt or killed by a LURD bullet. Conte, Obasanjo recalled, acknowledged that he had leverage with the LURD and would act to throttle its offensive.

17. (C) The MFI's Advisor for Africa interjected that the Guinea Foreign Minister had admitted that Conte had not yet contacted the LURD. Obasanjo stated that he would attempt again to talk to Conte. At that point, he received a telephone call from General Abubakar. Abubakar said that he had advised LURD Chairman Conneh to end the attack. Abubakar also planned to issue a statement calling for the restoration of the cease-fire.

THE U.S. ROLE

18. (C) Ambassador Jeter stressed that President Bush had not made the decision on whether to deploy American troops. However, we will do our best to provide assistance such as lift and equipment. He mentioned the possibility of the U.S. dispatching an assessment team to Nigeria to help determine the pre-deployment needs of the Nigerian battalions. Ambassador added that should President Bush decide to send American troops, the troops could only deploy after Taylor departed.

48 HOURS OR ELSE

19. (C) Obasanjo envisioned the deployment of Nigerian and possible other ECOWAS contingents prior to an American arrival. After the sub-regionals deployed, Taylor would be given 48 hours to leave for asylum. If he did not leave within 48 hours, "I will arrest him," Obasanjo asserted. (Note: Prior to the meeting with President Obasanjo, A/DCM had a brief discussion with Special Presidential Envoy for Conflict

Resolution, Raph Uwueche. Ambassador Uwueche said that he had visited Monrovia July 16 to confirm Taylor's willingness to leave Liberia. He said Taylor continued to voice willingness to leave provided that an orderly succession was arranged so that a power vacuum would not ensue. Uwueche returned to Abuja with Liberian Minister of State Jonathan Taylor and three other GOL officials in tow. This quartet came to survey Nigeria preparations for Taylor's exile and report back to their embattled leader in Monrovia.
End Note.)

COMMENT

¶10. (S) Obasanjo realizes that the pace of events on the grounds is much more rapid than ECOWAS planning. The events shaping Monrovia's fate are measured in hours or days. Meanwhile, ECOWAS deployment planning has been in terms of days and weeks. For the hundreds of thousands of unprotected civilians in Monrovia, their last best chance to avoid the specter of violence and deprivation is for LURD to halt its advance.

¶11. (C) Strong pressure must be placed on those in Guinea and perhaps Sierra Leone who can, in turn, pressure the LURD or stop its supply lines. If that can be accomplished, the pace of ECOWAS planning must be accelerated rapidly as any cease-fire will be fragile and inherently hard-lined. Obasanjo recognizes the need to bring the ECOWAS forces to bear quickly; thus, his readiness to quickly deploy Nigerian battalions in possible harm's way. We should applaud him for this.

¶12. (S) For his troops to deploy, Obasanjo will be looking for, at minimum, significant USG logistical assistance. He will also be knocking at our door for future OFR-type training for five battalions. If Nigeria deploys in Liberia, his request for future training will become a central aspect of future cooperation with Nigeria in peacekeeping. It will also be a crucial test for Obasanjo in the eyes of his reluctant military. If Obasanjo fails to deliver on the additional training, his stature will diminish in the eyes of a reluctant military.

¶13. (U) This cable was delayed in transmission; core content was relayed to the Department by other means.

JETER